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FEMINIST THEORY AND SOCIAL POLICY  
OR  
WHY IS WELFARE SO HARD TO REFORM?

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ABSTRACT

More than 10 years ago Henry Aaron wrote a classic paper entitled "Why Is Welfare So Hard to Reform?" (1973). This paper answers that question from the perspective of the new discipline of Women's Studies. The author suggests that the use of feminist theories; notably those of Hartsock and Chodorow; can further one's recognition and understanding of male bias in social policy development. Tracing the history of U.S. welfare policies for women and children the analysis provides explanations for the differential treatment of women in the welfare system and the failure of work strategies to increase poor women's economic independence. Flaws in proposals for welfare reform are discussed and some suggestions for the development of new models of policy analysis are made.

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The emerging discipline of Women's Studies is changing the face of various endeavors in society, both within and without academia. In social work the new women's consciousness has provided enlightenment with regard to women's experience, such as considerations of what constitutes mental health,(1) the "discovery" of wife battering (2) and sexism in the profession.(3) New methods of helping women cope with experiences particular to them have been developed, such as methods for the treatment of battered wives and the development of wo-

men's community service programs.(4) Considerations of broad social policy, however, have only occasionally taken women's experiences as women and women's lives into account.(5) A reexamination of the assumptions and methodology of social policy analysis is just beginning to take place.

The thesis of this paper is that an emerging feminist theory of knowledge can provide a useful way of analyzing the development and implementation of social policy. It also has the potential of transforming the basic methodology of social policy analysis. With the use of feminist scholarship, social policy analysis has the potential of becoming androgynous.

### Women's Studies

Women's studies began as a way of correcting ideas and information that have been distorted by sexist perspectives such as notions that women are as a group incapable of certain physical or mental activities, or that women enjoy being raped and battered.

The work of correcting misinformation about women is no small task, since the concept of womanhood and what it means has largely been invented and controlled by men. Work is being done in many fields, such as biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history to reveal the truth about women's lives.(6) Women's Studies does more than correct misperceptions, however.

Women's Studies is also about "filling in the gaps" of knowledge, where women's lives and perspectives have been ignored or hidden, and women's interests not pursued. Efforts in this area seek to discontinue the practice of simply studying men's lives and inappropriately generalizing one's conclusions to women. Thus, for example, historians are sear-

ching and finding information, heretofore unnoticed, about women's history.(7) Women's exclusion in sociological research has been challenged.(8) We have begun to see that understanding men is not tantamount to understanding women.

Notwithstanding the enormity of these undertakings, Women's Studies does not "stop" here. Theoretical and empirical studies have begun to question the very essence of knowledge in the Western World.

Our understanding of the act of knowing something and how we come to know it has been dominated by men for centuries. We have heard it said that men and women think differently - this has always been interpreted to mean that women do not think as well as men. Contradictions in views about women's thinking are commonplace. For example, some say that women's thinking is characterized by too much attention to small precise details rather than the whole picture. Others say that women are too emotional to think logically and precisely. In any case, women and men have accepted an ideal of rational objective thinking and have associated this ideal with men's thinking. Liberal feminists, for example, have attempted to groom women for success in the male labor force by teaching them to think like men. The book, Games Mother Never Taught You: Corporate Gamesmanship For Women explains that women don't get ahead because they are not socialized think in terms of the game rules that men have used since boyhood (Harragan, 1978). Now some feminists are saying that indeed, women by and large do think differently, due to their childhood socialization, but these thought processes are not inferior to men's but different from men's. Moreover, women's exclusion from the development of thought in the Western World renders this thought incomplete, partial, and biased.

It is important to note that the use herein of the gender designations of male and female refers to a conceptualization of two very different ways of thinking and perceiving the world. The male is the dominant form, constitutes the infrastructure of Western thought and is considered by most to be superior and of most value. The female is at best relegated to particular spheres of society (the home and the nursery) and although romanticized, in fact considered inferior and part of a lower domain. The terms do not refer to individual men and women, or even groups of men and women. It is probably true that most people incorporate some of both ways of thinking some or all of the time, although women are more likely to incorporate and adopt the male forms, since these provide the rules for getting about in the world. However, many men incorporate female forms and in social work it is probably more common for men to experience and espouse "female" ways of thinking, for reasons that will be discussed below. The point here is that in our culture one way of thinking, a way that is male-dominated, is considered superior by most people and essentially determines how social policy is formulated and implemented and how the country is run.

### Feminist Theory

According to Hartsock, the masculine world view is based on the concept of the dichotomous nature of things, the perception of the world as a series of dualisms. The mind/body dualism is central to this concept. The body is seen as inferior to the mind, the abstract on a higher plane than the concrete, and "man's" most noble aspirations are linked to overcoming or conquering the natural world, even death, for a higher purpose. In this construct women represent the inferior realm of material need. A woman-mother represents

nature, the temptations of the flesh, the earth. She also represents the mundane necessities of life, filth, and death (Hartsock; 1983:231-250).

Feminist psychoanalytic theory attributes the attainment of this dualistic framework to the parental sexual division of labor after birth, namely the fact that mothers and not fathers care for infants. This creates a difference in the developmental tasks required of males and females. Chodorow states:

From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate (1978:169).

Hartsock elaborates:

...the boy's construction of self in opposition to unity with the mother, his construction of identity as differentiation from the mother, sets a hostile and combative dualism at the heart of both the community men construct and the masculinist world view by means of which they understand their lives (1983:240).

In other words, males need to maintain the differentiation of self from "the other," or female, and retain their boundaries, or risk

fusion (Hartsock; 1983:240). The construction of dualisms is in service to this need. Hartsock explains:

Masculinity must be attained by means of opposition to the concrete world of daily life, by escaping from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of politics or public life. This experience of two worlds, one valuable, if abstract and deeply unattainable, the other useless and demeaning, if concrete and necessary, lies at the heart of a series of dualisms - abstract/concrete, mind/body, culture/nature, ideal/real, stasis/change. And these dualisms are overlaid by gender; only the first of each pair is associated with the male (1983:241).

Women's life experience is entirely different:

Women's construction of self in relation to others leads in an opposite direction - toward opposition to dualisms of any sort; valuation of concrete, everyday life; a sense of variety of connectednesses and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world. If material life structures consciousness; women's relationally defined existence, bodily experience of boundary challenges, and activity of transforming both physical objects and human beings must be expected to result in a world view to which dichotomies are foreign (Hartsock; 1983:242).

A study of women's moral values conducted

by Carol Gilligan supports these theories. She found that women's moral considerations tend to center on relational systems, that is, how one's actions will help or harm people, with an emphasis on caring and nurturing, and mutual responsibility for each other. In contrast, men's moral values uphold the ideal of morality to be adherence to abstract principles that transcend situational concerns (1982:10). One can see the mind/body dualism in this framework.

### Societal Implications

These theories offer additional explanations to the sociological and economic theories that seek to explain the intransigency of notions of male supremacy in society. They suggest that men seek to separate themselves from women in order to better define themselves and maintain their autonomy as well as to retain the power and privilege bequeathed them by the patriarchy. The sexual division of labor is established, with men in the public sector and women in the private, with the latter in service to the former. But, contrary to conservative arguments, the spheres are not held to be equally valuable, and women do not dominate the private sphere. Men must uphold their superiority and control in order to maintain their autonomy. The inferiority and dependency of women must be maintained. Thus women, like children, are assumed to be dependent, incapable of self-support, self-sufficiency, or even proper parenting without men. They are tied to the material necessities of life, from which men need to separate themselves for their own psychological survival.

Even in the public sphere, these dualities have been maintained to a great degree, through the occupational segregation of women and task differentiation in the work place. Women are responsible for the material well-



being and social compatibility of the work place. They not only get the coffee and take the notes; they also tend to advise the students, arrange for the rooms, greet the speakers. Note how many women top executives are in system-maintenance or people-oriented positions, rather than money or product-oriented jobs.

In social work, of course, there is a lot of cross-over because the profession by definition is concerned with making connections and taking care of people and the relationships that people have with the systems that provide their material needs. It is not a coincidence that social work is a women's profession. Social workers are the housewives of the world. They care for the dependent, neglected, rejected, and all those whom only a mother could love. And they are disparaged for it. Men social workers sometimes have a difficult time with this because they are identified with a female realm. It is a common notion that social workers are vilified because of their association with the poor, who are castigated for their dependency. I submit that they are held in low esteem also because they are so closely tied to basic material needs, that is, the female realm.

Let us now examine how these theories apply to considerations of welfare, poverty and welfare reform.

### The "Worthy" Poor

Women with children, the elderly and the disabled have traditionally been counted among the "worthy poor," that is groups who, when impoverished, deserve private or public charity. Able-bodied men, on the other hand, have always been classified as "unworthy poor," not only undeserving of charity but subject to punishment and humiliation. A common interpretation of this state of affairs is that

rather than blame the economic system for the impoverishment of men, it is easier and more functional for society to "blame the victim" for his dependency. The worthy poor, on the other hand, have obvious personal reasons for being dependent and therefore our help and sympathy for them are not threatening to society. The aged and disabled have been presumed to have a limited capacity for paid labor. Children are considered naturally dependent and their mothers are needed to take care of them. Presumably able-bodied women without children would be considered as unworthy as their male counterparts. Until recently, however, there have been very few able-bodied women without children, and the few that there were often stayed home to care for relatives' children, the sick, aged and dependent. For the majority, motherhood was not a free choice, either culturally or biologically, and for many today it still isn't. This circumstance has masked the fact that women have been included among the worthy poor not only due to their status as mothers but also because their dependency was assumed as a natural state of being.

Along with their children women have been, and still are, viewed as inherently dependent. According to the theory posed herein, their dependency is necessary to the differentiation of gender roles and the perpetuation of the patriarchal system. This dependency is maintained as a legitimate function of the welfare system in the absence of support by individual men, which is the preferred mode of dependency. From this perspective one can entertain the notion that able-bodied dependent men are denigrated not only because their existence challenges the economic system but also because their dependency "lowers" them to the status of women and children.

Throughout our history, even while women with children have been categorized among the

worthy poor, they have received and continue to receive less aid than the poor aged or handicapped, and they have been subject to much more stigmatization. Under Mothers' Pensions established by the states early in this century, financial aid was dependent not only upon need, but the woman's link to the father of her children: death and imprisonment of the husband were acceptable, divorce or desertion less acceptable, and out of wedlock parenthood completely unacceptable (Bell, 1965:8-9). The issue focused on the reluctance of the state to encourage men to abandon their families. But the women and children and not the men were punished for these circumstances. White widows and their children were the most likely to receive help, but even after meeting the stringent eligibility requirements the mothers were subject to constant monitoring of their child care and moral behavior (Bell; 1965: 8-9; 14).

The inclusion of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC - later to become AFDC) in the Social Security Act of 1935 did not change matters much. From the beginning, federal funds for the other assistance titled, Aid to the Blind and Old Age Assistance, were more generous (Bell; 1965: 22-23). Furthermore, the "suitable home" rules, used in Mothers' Pension programs, were incorporated into the program in most states. Mothers considered immoral or unfit could lose their children, or more likely, be denied ADC and awarded the lower general assistance grant instead (Bell; 1965:32-42). Later, as the rolls increased and more women with illegitimate children came on the rolls, "man in the house" or "substitute parent" rules were established. Any man with whom a recipient had a relationship was expected to support her and her children. The discovery of such a man constituted the discovery of a "substitute parent" and would result in a cut-off of the family's grant.

"Refusal to cooperate," including refusal to admit unannounced investigators into one's home at any hour of the day or night, could also result in the cessation of the grant (Bell; 1965:76-79; 184-89).

These diligent efforts were ostensibly undertaken to rule out fraud and cheating. However, they were not being applied with equal vigor to detect fraud among aged, blind and disabled recipients of welfare grants.

The culmination of the differential treatment of women with children on welfare was the establishment of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program in 1973 that federalized welfare for the poor aged, blind and disabled. SSI pays, on the average, more than AFDC. The median monthly state payment per four person family on AFDC in July, 1982 was \$368 (Welfare Advocates, 1982:14). The Federal monthly payment for an SSI couple was \$426.40 (Welfare Advocates, 1982:5). SSI is more equitable from state to state, and is much less visible than AFDC, a great advantage for a means-tested program. Since 1975 it has had an automatic adjustment of benefits tied to yearly increases in the cost of living. Although means-tested it is much less stigmatized and some writers no longer refer to it as "welfare".

This differential treatment of welfare recipients lies in the patriarchal necessity of perpetuating women's dependency while espousing its inevitability. The most acceptable dependency is within the family structure. Outside the family dependency on the state is preferred to economic independence but it must include control - to substitute for the control imposed within marriage, and punishment - for the condition of malelessness. A woman who does not clearly depend upon a man threatens gender differentiation since she is "acting like a man." Therefore

she must be controlled and/or punished for her independence. Thus, women without escorts are in danger of being raped; the threat of rape inhibits their independence and controls them. If they ignore the threats the actual rape punishes them. Likewise, if a woman dares to be independent through divorce or separation or gives birth to illegitimate children, she subjects herself to potential punishment or control. This is why punishment and control of the woman client has permeated the administration of the AFDC Program from its inception.

### Work Strategies and Welfare Mothers

Work strategies introduced into the AFDC programs in 1967 in response to the enormous rise in the rolls that was occurring at the time and the increasing acceptance of mothers in the work place. Work incentives were established through deductables for child care and work expenses, as well as allowing the recipient to "keep" the first \$30 earned and 30 cents on the dollar thereafter. The Work Incentive Program (WIN) was established to provide job training, job referrals, and supportive social services such as transportation and child care to AFDC recipients.

The WIN program has been in existence for a long time and it is instructive to examine its impact. A 1982 General Accounting Office (GAO) report indicated that the program fell far short of achieving its objectives. The GAO study found that very few people were even served by the program because of inadequate resources, and most of those served obtained jobs on their own without benefit of the program (U.S. General Accounting Office; 1982:16). Moreover the Jobs didn't pay well; as a result, many registrants remained economically dependent on AFDC (p. 21). An analysis by Mildred Rein reinforces these findings. She indicates that many registrants received service and training that were not immediately

work-related (1982a:66). Furthermore, available funds for work-related social services and child care under Title XX were minimally allocated for WIN registrants and instead primarily used for higher income, non-AFDC, income-eligible service populations (1982b:214). There is also evidence that women, minorities and youth were underserved by WIN and that job placement through WIN increased men's earnings much more than women's (Pearce and McAdoo, 1981:10).

According to my analysis, the WIN program was not successful in bringing women-headed families out of poverty and dependency because it was not designed to do so on any significant scale. The underlying functions of the WIN program were to reduce the cost of AFDC marginally by encouraging some work effort and to uphold the national value of the importance of work. The few resources the program did have were used to attempt to change the clients without changing women's place in the labor force. Launching an effective work program would have involved working to broaden women's work opportunities beyond the low pay, dead end, secondary labor market. It would have meant training them for "men's" jobs, seeing that the women got them, and demanding equal pay for equal work as well as comparable pay for jobs of equal worth. It did not change AFDC or the labor market. These functions of the WIN program are compatible with the underlying functions of AFDC which are to uphold the patriarchal system by limiting recipients' choices to dependence on the state or individual men, and to facilitate the economy's reliance on a secondary labor force.

The significance of this analysis is that it assumes that these underlying functions (of AFDC and WIN) were not consciously formulated but are the result of a perspective that is based on a white male world view. This view, described above, is so imbued with assumptions

about the nature of men and women that the failure of the manifest goals of the WIN Program was inevitable but unanticipated.

### Current Issues

The conservative program of the Reagan administration, which openly espouses the rigid differentiation of gender roles, has explicitly attempted to increase and enhance men's control and women's dependency. This Administration influenced the Congress to limit the \$30 plus one-third work incentives of AFDC to the first four months of welfare, put ceilings on the allowance for child care and work expenses, and cut social services. In addition, the Administration has attempted to limit birth control information and has essentially banned abortion for large segments of the population (Bell; 1983: 123). Women on welfare are now poorer and it has become economically preferable for many women to be on welfare rather than take a Job (Joe; 1982:14; ii). The Administration has developed the Community Work Experience Program (CWEP) and the Work Supplementation Program (WSP) without pretending that these have anything to do with meaningful work, adequate pay, or career ladders (Rein; 1982a: 156-58). These programs are geared to cost savings, punishment, and control.

### Current Welfare Reform Proposals

With new cuts in social programs and considerations of the economy, currently there is a renewed interest in welfare reform. But this time it is more "realistic." Bradley Schiller, for example, has suggested that we revise our expectations for welfare reform. He notes that providing good jobs for welfare recipients might entice some to go on welfare just to get a good job, so he rejects that idea. Instead he says, "The welfare system in its many manifestations has helped millions of

individuals and continues to do so. In this sense, the system has largely attained its original goal of providing minimum income support" (1981:64-65). He thus resigns himself to the poverty of 11 million persons, most of them children. Indeed, most analysts reject the possibility of tampering with the reward system in the labor force that penalizes women, in spite of the fact that the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity pointed out that "if wives and female heads of households were paid the wages that similarly qualified men earn, about half of the families now living in poverty would not be poor" (Pearce and McAadoo; 1981:3). Even those who propose jobs as the answer to poverty tend to ignore the differential compensation of blacks and women in the labor market.(9)

Another area that is not considered among policy analysts is the complication of combining labor force participation and homemaking. The dualistic concept of public/private spheres renders women's work at home as trivial or non-existent. The proximity of the (paid) work place to the home, the child care center, the school, the launderette and the grocery store, and all of these to each other, has rarely been considered seriously in work-related welfare reform proposals. Moreover, societal institutions are, for the most part, designed to accommodate the work patterns of affluent white families with men in the labor force and women at home. Thus we have incongruent work and school hours, no time off for child care, rigid work hours and weeks, to name but a few. Furthermore, the time and effort required to do "woman's work", shopping, cooking, chauffeuring, laundering, cleaning, is a problem for the working poor. Fashionable newspaper articles ask whether the career woman with a \$35,000 per year salary and a husband who makes even more can "do it all." Yet we expect poor women to do it all,



often without another adult in the household, without monetary resources, and without accommodation in the labor force or other societal institutions. If men were obliged to do even half of the household chores that women do, the labor force would have shifted to a four day week years ago.

There are existing reform proposals that, if achieved in reasonable forms, would alleviate poverty for all poor persons, regardless of family composition. Many have advocated for a noncategorical guaranteed minimum income, a national health program for everyone, better housing, and universal social services including comprehensive child care.(10) As proposals are developed beyond the suggestion state, however, and are prepared as proposals for legislative enactment, often their original goals become obscured. It is within the specific areas of design that biased assumptions and distortions in thinking tend to appear. The WIN program, for example, was a liberal program that failed through its design as well as from a lack of resources. Indeed, as proposals for reform get closer to the corridors of power and thus become more likely to be considered, policy analysts tend to make them more categorical, more specific, more punitive, less comprehensive, more cynical, more traditional. They tend to ignore the importance of people.

### New Models of Policy Analysis

It is necessary to build new models of policy analysis that recognize the blind spots of the old way of thinking and that counterbalance traditional methods. These new models should move policy analysts toward androgynous thinking by attempting to break down the false dichotomies of abstract principles and material reality. The new models would reject the false assumption that there is any such thing as pure objectivity and would accept the in-

evitability of subjectivity. They would reject the dualistic notion of the private realm versus the public, recognizing the needs, demands and importance to the individual of both realms, and their interdependence. They would begin and end with the individual and the family.

One way to begin doing this is to add experiential elements to the design and process of policy analysis. To mathematical formulas and economic simulations, qualitative information should be added and compared. The use of simulation techniques among policy analysts themselves is one way of doing this. Thelma McCormack, writing on futures research, discusses simulation as a research tool. She writes:

Simulation. . .refers to a type of research which examines processes, e.g. decision-making...in a laboratory situation where extraneous or compounding factors can be eliminated or where it is possible to introduce factors that are obscured in historical records ...Simulation can, and in most instances does, assume role flexibility, the blue collar worker is asked to be a diplomat; the executive a union leader; a driver, a pedestrian; a college professor, a judge; a school drop-out, a banker (1981:9).

This type of exercise is, of course, not new. It is used as an educational device to produce insight and understanding of a particular experience or circumstance. I suggest that simulated experiences of clients be incorporated seriously and systematically into the process of policy analysis for purposes of broadening the scope of reality for policy analysts, providing help in conceptualizing

problems from a client's perspective and facilitating creative and relevant policy alternatives.

Another method is to consult clients directly, on a regular basis, about their lives and how they perceive their needs and the operation of the system. It is very easy for all of us to become disassociated with the very people about whom we profess to be concerned. People's lives become obscured by the statistical data and analysts need to construct better ways of obtaining and institutionalizing the use of people's own views of their own lives. McCormack quoted Einstein in her paper: "In so far as mathematics is about reality, it is not certain; and in so far as it is certain, it is not about reality" (1981:4). Incorporating qualitative processes of data collection would have the goal of grounding policy analysis to material reality. Quantitative research should not be abandoned but qualitative inquiry is crucial to the interpretation of results and the formulation of policies that are relevant to the way people really live.

A third avenue that must be pursued is to encourage more women to be involved with the formulation and analysis of social policy. Bringing more women into the field of social policy should increase the likelihood of androgynous formulations, provided that they do not buy into the system by "thinking like a man." In addition, the common experiences that we share with women on AFDC should be acknowledged and used. Those of us who have been welfare clients should be encouraged without stigma to speak about our experiences. We must come to grips with the fact that in very important ways, "they" are "us"

### Conclusions

This paper's analysis is a beginning at-

tempt to use feminist theory to discover and explicate how and where social policy has distorted women's lives, disregarded their experiences, or, in its methodology, failed to incorporate woman-oriented thinking. What I propose is the development of androgynous thinking in policy analysis and policy making. At this point we can only begin to determine what this would look like and what difference it would make.

It seems difficult to discuss women's issues from the perspective of a women's profession because the male/female distinctions are not clear-cut and because there is a lot of defensiveness among both men and women professionals who struggle for status and rewards that are not forthcoming from society. With new understandings of the obstacles, however, social workers can be better prepared to develop new methods and new creative solutions to the problems that confront them.

Pioneers are breaking new ground every day in relation to the theories and issues discussed in this paper. Social workers and policy analysts can either be part of this work or can once again watch passively from the sidelines. It is unfortunate, for example, that shelters for battered women were initially established by activists in the women's movement, not the social work profession. Social workers and others in the social sciences participated too long in the conspiracy of silence that denied the reality of battered women's experiences. Now that it is "safe," social workers are delivering appropriate services to battered women and "family violence," has become a popular area for research. Let us not repeat this process over and over again!

What I have suggested here is the beginning of an enormous undertaking. It will take a lot of work and a lot of re-working, as we

struggle to develop and clarify our thinking on these issues. Yet the effort has the potential of effecting great positive change. I invite you to join me in clearing the woods.

1. See Gottlieb (1981); Hipple and Hipple (1980); and Berlin (1976).
2. See Carlson (1977) and Schuyler (1976).
3. See Sutton (1982); Dailey (1980); Langres and Bailey (1979); Rauch (1978); Knapman (1977); Belon and Gould (1977); Romero (1977); Fischer et al. (1976); Kravetz (1976); Zeitz and Erlich (1976); and Fanshel (1976).
4. See Pfouts and Renz (1981); Castantino (1981); and McShane (1979).
5. See Boneparth (1982); Chambre (1980); Wattenberg and Reinhardt (1979); Rosenman (1979); and Young (1977).
6. See Spender (1981); Lowe and Hubbard (1983); Longino and Doell (1983).
7. See Sicherman et al (1981); Lerner (1978); Morton (1979); and Cott and Plect (1978).
8. See Gould (1980); and Lopata (1976).
9. See for example, Rein (1982a); Schiller (1981); Public Welfare (1980); Turem (1982).
10. See Bell (1983); Dolgoff and Feldstein (1980); Rodgers (1982); and Kamerman and Kahn (1979).

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